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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcomes of the twenty-third special session and its contribution to shaping a gender perspective in the realization of the Millennium Development Goals

Statement submitted by the International Planned Parenthood Federation, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

1. The International Planned Parenthood Federation welcomes the theme of the fifty-fourth session of the Commission on the Status of Women. As a service provider and advocate for sexual and reproductive health and rights, the Federation is committed to implementing the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, the Beijing Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals. Working through 148 member associations in 171 countries, the Federation believes sexual and reproductive health and rights are central to equitable and sustainable development and to addressing obstacles to women's progress worldwide. The work of the Federation demonstrates that lives can be transformed if women are empowered to act on the basis of their sexual and reproductive rights. We believe the right to sexual and reproductive health and well-being is essential for the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals, especially Goals 3, 4, 5 and 6, and for sustainable social and economic development.

2. The status of women and girls has advanced in some important areas; however, it is clear that progress remains uneven. It is evident that gender inequalities still exist; this is reflected in the imbalances of power between women and men in all spheres of society. Major obstacles to gender equality and equity undermine the health and well-being of individuals, families, communities and nations. The Federation recognizes that these inequities are aggravated by increased poverty, which is further exacerbated by the current economic crisis and competing development priorities such as climate change. Women are the drivers of development and catalysts of change and should be involved in decisions which affect their lives and those of their families, including local responses to climate change.

3. The Federation recognizes that it is incumbent upon Member States to ensure the rights of all, including women and girls, to the highest attainable standard of health. It also notes that many of the most obstructive barriers to gender equity and development are related to women's sexual and reproductive health and rights and that these obstacles disproportionately affect young women. The Federation believes that sexual and reproductive health and rights are central to development and the achievement of gender equality and equity. Everyone, irrespective of their race, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, HIV status, marital status or economic situation, has the right to equality and freedom from all forms of discrimination and violence, including with respect to their sexual and reproductive health and well-being. The Federation urges Member States to recognize reproductive and sexual rights, which fall within the canon of human rights. These rights are both universal and indivisible,[1] and comply with internationally recognized principles of non-discrimination. The Federation also urges Member States to acknowledge the need for increased efforts in understanding, addressing and challenging norms relating to sexuality and gender. We welcome the United Nations resolution on maternal mortality and post-conflict contexts (see Security Council resolution 1889 (2009)), which reinforce this need; we further welcome the belated prioritization of maternal mortality and morbidity, which is a preventable public health pandemic and a denial of human rights.

[1] See "Sexual Rights: An IPPF Declaration", IPPF, London, 2008. See Security Council resolution 1889 (2009)

4. The Federation recognizes that the empowerment of women and girls is central to reducing the cycle of discrimination and violence, including child marriage and harmful practices. It is also essential for promoting and protecting the full and effective enjoyment of their human rights. To advance women's and girls' rights, achieve gender equity and ensure the rights of women and girls to the highest attainable standard of health, it is necessary to focus on young women's sexual and reproductive rights. Pregnancy-related complications and the complications of unsafe abortion are the leading cause of death, for young women aged 15 to 19, worldwide. As Member States will acknowledge, young women are particularly vulnerable to early marriage, pregnancy-related complications, unsafe abortion, sexual violence and coercion, human trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation, female genital mutilation, the discontinuation of studies (often due to child marriage or adolescent pregnancy) and poverty. It is important for Member States to meet the educational and service needs of adolescents, including through providing access to comprehensive sexuality education. This will also assist in breaking down traditional gender stereotypes.

5. The Beijing Platform for Action, in paragraph 96, notes, "the human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence, and that equal relationships between women and men in matters of sexual relations and reproduction, including full respect for the integrity of the person, require mutual respect, consent and shared responsibility for sexual behaviour and its consequences". Sexual violence against women and girls increases in humanitarian emergencies, particularly in conflict situations, and in settings affected by natural disaster. It is therefore crucial for Member States to protect women and girls from sexual violence, especially during times of conflict and crisis. IPPF welcomes Security Council resolutions 1820 (2008) and 1888 (2009), which call on Governments to take measures to eliminate sexual violence against women and girls in conflict situations and to end impunity for perpetrators. In accordance with those resolutions, IPPF recommends that Member States guarantee that survivors of sexual violence are not subjected to gender-insensitive laws or policies and are provided with services to address all of their needs and that perpetrators are dealt with according to international law.

6. In order to address these issues and fully implement the Beijing Platform for Action, it is incumbent upon Member States to take steps to advance gender equality and equity. This includes the provision of sexual and reproductive health services, education and literacy programmes, and a continued push for health and well-being, to break the cycle of poverty. Member States must ensure that all young women have access to comprehensive and gender-sensitive sexuality education in both formal and informal educational settings; expand youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services; ensure universal access to a comprehensive package of sexual and reproductive health services; and provide counselling and information and quality care. It is also essential that young women be involved in the design and evaluation of services. Member States should ensure access to safe, legal and affordable abortion services for all women and adolescent girls, recognizing that at least 70,000 girls and women die annually and another 8 million suffer serious complications from unsafe abortion. Women are the drivers of development and young women should be empowered to exercise their rights and take leadership roles in decision-making and income generation.

7. Gender equality and equity and the political, social and economic empowerment of women and girls are essential to reduce their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. This is increased by their unequal legal, economic, educational and social status, physiological factors and other socio-economic and cultural factors. A stronger focus is urgently required to meet the unmet need of 201 million women for family planning, including HIV/AIDS services.

8. Member States need to implement measures that fully integrate women into the formal economy, to ensure that women and men are treated equally in both formal and informal working environments, including in the context of caregiving; this would include, for example, those caring for persons living with HIV and AIDS. The Federation recommends that Member States increase the mainstreaming of gender perspectives into all legislation, policies and programmes, to ensure gender-responsive budgeting. It strongly supports the decision of the General Assembly to create a new gender equality entity headed by an Under-Secretary-General (see General Assembly resolution 63/311, paras. 1 and 2).

9. Women and children must be central to health systems strengthening. Fact-based evidence on young women's sexual and reproductive health is vital and needs to be fully disaggregated by age and sex. This will help provide a fuller understanding of the barriers that women face and the interventions required. Policies and laws should promote gender equity and young women's empowerment, including the abolition of parental or spousal consent laws, restrictive abortion legislation and the criminalization of HIV/AIDS, which increase the risk of morbidity and mortality, and prevent young women from exercising their human rights.

10. Member States must ensure adequate financial, human and technical resources to implement effective interventions to improve the health and well-being of women. Member States should also develop effective strategies to ensure gender equity and gender-sensitive sexual and reproductive health and rights programmes and policies. These should be central to any new development framework in 2015. Member States should also recognize that the success of such a framework will require the meaningful engagement of civil society and leadership by young women.